Keyword Essay: "Community Management"

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Community Management

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Keywords Essay

Community literacy often engages with literacy practices—written, oral, visual, technological, social, and so forth—that occur and are scaffolded outside of traditional educational institutions. The writing done in community literacy projects, according to Peck, Flower, and Higgins, works to promote action and reflection while enabling people to work collaboratively and productively. In recognition of the multiple forms of literate practices and the types of community support that are needed and developed, a number of universities in the US have created community literacy programs. Carnegie Mellon University's Community Literacy Center, a notable example of this type of program, organizes the purposes and structural collaboration thusly: "At the Community Literacy Center (CLC) urban teens and adults, with the support of their Carnegie Mellon student mentors, use writing and public dialogue to take action and to address the dreams and problems of our urban neighborhoods. CLC writers produce powerful texts—petitions, plans, proposals, and newsletters" ("Hands On"). The benefit to both university students and community members is a collaborative workgroup dedicated to place-specific social action. Non-profit organizations have also formed, providing literacy support to particular communities, from Community Literacy Centers, Inc, which teaches adults to read, to Chicago's Open Books, which runs a volunteer bookstore and provides reading and writing programs.

In the above examples, the underpinning definition of community is spatially defined; thus, community literacy programs belong to a particular city, neighborhood, or group of people. The challenge is attending to opt-in communities that are not geographically defined—communities that form in large part because of Internet access and continuous involvement in online, virtual spaces rather than material locations. Centers, then, are replaced by forums, wikis, and avatar-mediated conversations, and in this environment, community center teachers and organizers are replaced by community managers, those people who work at the intersection between IP holders and players, mediating literate practices, mentoring new people, and working with players to effect changes to the system.

Community managers, as the title indicates, emerge from the business world in attempt to build and maintain brand loyalty through cultivating a dedicated community through social media and live social events. In discussing the evolution of the community manager, Michlmayr writes, "The benefits of communities and the need to facilitate and manage them have given rise to the community manager position. […] The community manager] ensures that there is a healthy community around

the project, interacts with users, developers and other stakeholders, and facilitates organizational aspects of the project" (23). This suggests that community managers are shills for the business world; however, as Bacon explains in *The Art of Community: Building the New Age of Participation*, "community managers may well need to step outside the traditional boundaries of the business world. For a community manager to really build a rapport with the community, he needs to fundamentally be a member of that community and exhibit the culture of that community" (471). And in her *Forbes* article, Jennifer Grayeb defines the four pillars of community management as growth, engagement, listening, and improvement. The growth of the community is the growth of the brand, but aside from that, the latter three pillars are familiar to us in community literacy, for they are concerned with the sustainability of an engaged community.

In Massive Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) communities, in particular, community managers have a prominent role because the number of members makes the environment potentially too large and alienating. According to Humphreys, the community manager position answers the particular challenges of online community sustainability. He writes: "The creation of subscription based virtual game worlds has generated the creation of communities. How are these communities to be managed? Do game participants hold all the rights of an ordinary offline citizen—the right to the same protections and freedoms? Is a publisher under any obligation to treat the game world community fairly?" (14). *World of Warcraft,* for example, is often cited as a community-building game, which accounts for its financial success and longevity. This is evidenced in numerous places: In "An Online Community as a New Tribalism: The World of Warcraft," Brignall and Van Valey argue, "Online communities offer individuals the ability to locate (at least in a virtual sense) and interact with other players who share a common identity or interests. WOW was explicitly designed to foster such socializing within the game." Indeed, it is this virtual socialization that has attracted attention from social scientists and literacy experts (see, for example, Nardi, *My Life as a Night Elf Priest*; Bainbridge, *The Warcraft Civilization: Social Science in a Virtual World*; Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*; Squire, "Video-Game Literacy: A Literacy of Expertise"). Furthermore, as Gibbs et al. have discussed, the rich lives that people sustain in these games has given rise to in-game weddings and funerals, which reflect out-of-game events. Not only are people actively participating in their virtual communities, they are generating a tremendous amount of literacy-based artifacts. For example, the *World of Warcraft* wiki, or WoWWiki, is the second largest in the world (Wikipedia is the first), with over 80,000 articles, and 5 million people access it monthly (McGonigal). These varied creations of community and literacy practices have outpaced the original expectations or even control of the original game creators. Yet the IP holders are loath to quash this type of community building and community practice because the vitality of the online space requires these types of social interactions and knowledge creation to continue occurring.

The work of community managers is often invisible to the community it serves. According to the "Community Manager" page on the WoWWiki, "A Community Manager is a Blizzard Entertainment employee that monitors the World of Warcraft

forums, acting as a liaison between the players and the developers, along with other community-related responsibilities." To this fairly simple definition, community manager Eyonix writes that his job entails disseminating information and providing feedback to the development team. "This feedback" he explains, "is gathered from numerous locations, which include but are certainly not limited to these forums, in-game chat, fan sites, guild sites, and third-party discussion forums." Further, he writes, "Beyond all of this, as a Community Manager I'm also here to moderate discussions, provide personal insight, offer humor, spotlight community related items, and silently absorb much of what our players are expressing and feeling." Thus, while Eyonix and other community managers participate and guide players, edit work written in public forums, and teach new players how to play, a vast majority of their work around players is simply listening and reading. Based on the garnered information, they are able to go back to developers, who are interested in refining the in-game experience.

Community managers are not just hired and assigned to the role. In these types of dynamic communities, community managers emerge just as often as they are consciously created. In their article "The Uses of Multimedia: Three Digital Literacy Case Studies," Hartley et al. discuss disruptions caused by digital literacy and the emerging role of the community manager as active literate agent:

> This attention-seeking and often competitive action can perhaps also be characterised as a type of Schumpeterian 'consumer entrepreneurialism', particularly because it is both creative and destructive. It creates knowledge, but this distributed network of professional and non-professional expertise also disrupts industrial-era modes of controlling and organising cultural production. This entrepreneurialism, as an emergent market, introduces growth, dynamism and change. A focus on this agency as a form of digital literacy exercised by creative consumer-citizens requires us to grapple with processes of the origination, adoption and retention of knowledge. (69)

The authors discuss the case of Alex Weekes, whose online fan participation in the community as a writer and knowledge builder transformed into professional community relations manager work. Similarly, Dan Gray's successful forum moderator ability brought him to the attention of the game company, and his digital literacy and community management transformed into a corporate job.

Community managers are expected to attend closely to the community (which is why active fans are often nurtured into this position), which feeds back into the development cycle, and the development cycle in computer games is invested in enhancing player experience and player community. In their case study "The Orchestrating Firm: Value Creation in the Video Game Industry," Gidhagen et al. note, "[a]lthough users actively help each other in solving problems and answering questions via the community, many developers have so called Community Managers employed who monitor the activities within the community and its different subforums." Their

jobs go beyond simple monitoring activities, and their value is evidenced by the fact that some developers have hundreds of community managers. Through a number of activities, such as monitoring the community forums, reading social networking sites, visiting fan sites, and answering directed questions, "the Community Manager is a representative of the developer's way of attending to its users' requirements; they are to be considerate of, and pick up on, how gamers react to what the developer does. The role of a Community Manager therefore entails constant interaction and communication with users, especially with those users having been given the role of moderator in the community." And this constant interaction, according to Ruggles et al., is predicated on trust: "In order to build trust, players must feel that their issues are being heard and not being ignored, and that the commitments made to them by the developer are being fulfilled. Developers must ensure that they are communicating changes being made in the game and what the plans are for the future to the community (Company C)" (122).

Such feedback loops are not merely one way—from developer to consumer—but act to bring community players into the community of development as active co-creators. This, in turn, enables the participatory community to invest in the longitudinal sustainability and success of the community. For example, Jeppesen and Molin argue in "Consumers as Co-Developers: Learning and Innovation Outside the Firm," consumer communities generate innovation through their needs, ideas, and critiques, and the community manager can help to sustain a critical mass of people, enough so that the community is stable, and then translate community feedback to businesses. This is easily seen in computer game development, as Banks describes in both "Co-Creative Expertise: Auran Games and Fury—A Case Study" and his co-written article with Potts entitled "Co-Creating Games: A Co-Evolutionary Analysis." According to these two articles, the role of the active player as co-creator is powerful yet does not always fit into traditional industry practices. However, players and community managers are active participants in the community and know their informational, literate, or gamic needs. Banks reports that the community managers he talked with became frustrated with the development team and its lack of response to player feedback. The development team then became frustrated with players and their lack of development knowledge. According to Banks, "This problem and challenge of coordinating often competing and divergent if not incommensurable forms of expertise in the design decision-making process gets us to the core dilemma of distributed expertise networks" (10). And at the heart of these distributed expertise networks is the community manager, which explains the defensive position that Eyonix takes when he writes, "I wrote this post primarily because I've seen threads requesting clarification on what my role within the company was, and in general see a great deal of expectation surrounding the opinion of what I should be doing, and how I'm failing."

The community "centers" or sites in which community managers participate are difficult to pinpoint; like so much on the internet, community participation is dispersed and sometimes protected. In computer games, such as *World of Warcraft*, literate practices occur in game, in developer-created forums, and in game-specific wikis such as the WoWWiki. People come together in these sites to share their stories,

mentor one another, and ask for help. However, in addition to these business-controlled centers, players will develop their own fan websites, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, blogs, and online file sharing sites to disseminate fan fiction and machinima (cinematic shorts produced with a computer game engine). These exist in parallel to the codified developer-supported communities, and are equally important in maintaining a sense of community and also enabling the experience of the game to penetrate non-gaming life through alternative forms of participation. And this is important to mention in a keywords essay on community managers because community managers must also participate in these other venues of community action and respond to the types of information and action happening in non-corporate channels. Only through doing so does the community manager belong to the community at large rather than the institutionalized community.

The community manager, in the way that it is employed by business and gaming communities, seems in one sense to be a world away from community literacy and the situated knowledges of community practice. However, community managers are a response to the formation of digital communities, and oftentimes, digital communities overlay physical communities—made easier with smartphones and mobile Internet technologies. Indeed, De Cindio and Peraboni see the facilitative role of community managers, not in computer games, but in grassroot movements and community actions. In their article "Design Issues for Building Deliberative Digital Habitats," De Cindio and Peraboni write:

> The Galateo [code of conduct] brings along with it the need to choose a trusted person committed to let the Galateo be observed: this is the role of the community manager. Rather then being a censor in charge of disapproving messages that fail to comply with the Galateo, or a policeman who bans participants, s/he plays the role of the person who helps participants to state their ideas in fair and civil fashion. Thanks to this work s/he is recognized as a digital communication expert who supports less skilled participants (public officers, politicians, elected representatives as well as generic citizens) in learning and facing with the dynamics typical of the online environments.

The community manager, in this deliberative, social action situation, acts as a facilitator, a mentor in digital communication, and a guide in digital forums (those metaphoric Roman places for public discourse).

What we learn from the literature of community managers is the need to find all of the digital expressions of a singly defined community and bring those expressions into a coherent narrative to a particular end or need. It is no surprise that the business world created a position called "community manager" as they attempt to harness the consumer under the umbrella of certain brands. It is also of no surprise that computer games coopted the community manager to extend the formation of communities and provide a gamic experience that responds to community desires. What the final

citation in this essay points to is the potential to learn from the efforts of community managers, who 1) mobilize dispersed and apparently disparate groups of people who are bound together by common needs and civic engagements and 2) find in those groups a narrative that brings them together. A community manager is, above all else, invested as an active member of a community and is interested in distilling hundreds, sometimes thousands of voices into clear themes and passing those onto the people who ostensibly serve those particular communities.

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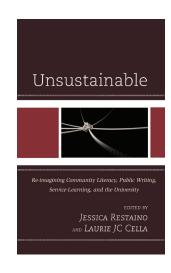
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Unsustainable: Re-Imagining Community Literacy, Public Writing, Service-Learning and the University

Restaino, Jessica and Laurie JC Cella, eds.
Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013. 275 pp.

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In *Unsustainable: Re-Imagining Community Literacy, Public Writing, Service-Learning and the University,* the collection's authors address community and university factors that contribute to unsustainable civic and service-learning projects. In light of the shortcomings outlined in these projects, the collection advocates for a more flexible way of defining and assessing sustainability, something Paula Mathieu calls for in *Tactics of Hope*, a community literacy text that is significantly referenced throughout *Unsustainable*. In *Tactics of Hope*, Mathieu states that all sustainable projects are unpredictable; therefore, service-learning leaders and practitioners must create alternative visions of projects as the needs and circumstances of these projects change, including nontraditional assessment methodologies. University-led civic and service-learning projects are traditionally assessed based on the sustainability of the project and the successful completion of university goals (17). *Tactics of Hope* encourages nontraditional assessment methodologies that focus on the collaborative processes and personal relationships formed between community and university, meaning projects can be "unsustainable" but still be successes because of the positive relationships formed. It is this concept of nontraditional assessment of sustainability that *Unsustainable* advocates for—finding successes in "unsustainable" civic and service-learning projects.

In Part I, "Short-Lived Projects, Long-Lived Value," contributing authors discuss factors that caused their respective university-based service-learning projects to prematurely end, and, in some cases, how projects continued, in altered form, when university sponsorship ended. The section begins with Mathieu's "After Tactics, What Comes Next?," which picks up where *Tactics of Hope* leaves off. In Chapter 1, Mathieu updates readers that the three-way community partnership of Boston College, Sandra's Lodge (a Boston-based homeless shelter), and *Spare Change News* (a Boston street newspaper written by the homeless and low-income) she discussed in *Tactics of Hope* was unsustainable after it lost significant funding and detached from the academic